

August 31, 2008

THE CARPETBAGGER

Twin Cities, Worthy of Topping the Last Act

By [DAVID CARR](#)

In politics, there is a truism that you should be careful who and what you follow on stage, a maxim that is about to land on the Twin Cities with significant force in the wake of the much ballyhooed Democratic convention in Denver.

Sitting at the gate at the Denver airport on Friday evening with his family waiting for his flight back home, R. T. Rybak, the mayor of Minneapolis and the first big-city mayor to back Senator [Barack Obama](#), was elated and undaunted. He said he was ready to take one party hat off — the baseball cap that says Obama '08 — and put on his other party hat, as one of two Democratic mayors hosting the [Republican National Convention](#) this week.

Still antic with exhilaration over the nomination of Mr. Obama, he waved away any civic worry about how the coming week would play with the national audience tuning in to watch Senator [John McCain](#) accept his party's nomination at the Xcel Energy Center in nearby St. Paul.

"I have thought very hard about this," Mr. Rybak said. "We are hosting the convention, we are not putting it on. I am not hoping that the Republicans have a better event inside the arena than my party did, but to know us is to love us. I think the Twin Cities can top Denver in terms of what we have to offer."

It will be a steep hill — Rocky Mountain steep. The Democratic convention in Denver was a bit of a head turner for even seasoned observers. There was a steady buildup all week to the huge gathering at Invesco Field, and then an explosion of rhetoric, fireworks and galas after Mr. Obama's speech on Thursday night. The scale of the convention, along with the thin air, left more than a few gasping for air.

The politically interested will now switch from one city to another — two really, since both Minneapolis and St. Paul will play a role — trading Democrats for Republicans, mountains for lakes, and cow town pride for Minnesota Nice.

By midweek, the mayor of Denver, John Hickenlooper, was all but crowing with pride at a party for Slate: "I think our best foot is certainly forward." It did go well, give or take a chronic shortage of cabs, complaints from protesters about penning in free speech, and a memorable exit from Invesco Field that resembled the panicked abandonment of a very large ship. ("Yes we can," shouted people over protesting police officers as they pushed down fences to escape.)

The main complaint from the Denver convention attendees had to do with the city's huge scale, spread out over wide streets and a grid where people sometimes could not get there from here.

That won't be a problem in St. Paul. A handsome little city that hugs the Mississippi River but does not soar above it, downtown St. Paul can be navigated in a 20-minute walk.

It is a city ringed by intimate, interwoven neighborhoods and features a downtown that tucks itself in early. St. Paul is less used to the limelight than the shadow, the one cast by Minneapolis, its bigger and more image-conscious neighbor. And this week will be no exception: Even though the convention itself will be held in St. Paul, many of the events and the people who will populate them will be staying in Minneapolis. What ties the cities together is 10 miles of Interstate 94 and a desire to be known for something besides the fact that you need the equivalent of a spacesuit to go outside for four months of the year.

When the Goodyear blimp comes to town for big events — Minnesota has been host to two World Series, a [Super Bowl](#), two U.S. Opens and the

Stanley Cup — Minnesotans have been known to chase after it and give it a big wave. If Denver is the West, with its own pride of place, in Minnesota they are still in the habit of looking east for affirmation.

“People used to call Minneapolis the Minneapple, for crying out loud,” said Jim Leinfelder, a freelance television producer who lives in St. Paul. “We refer to ourselves and our cities as flyover land and think that the Super Bowl or the R.N.C. will be somehow transformative. It won’t be.”

Not that Minnesota does not have its own stake in the national narrative. Some of the giants of the political landscape once strode here, like Eugene J. McCarthy, [Hubert H. Humphrey](#) and [Walter F. Mondale](#). But the state has a Republican governor, [Tim Pawlenty](#), and Minnesota played host to the wrestler [Jesse Ventura](#)’s successful insurgent grab for the governor’s chair and has a very serious Senate candidate in the funnyman [Al Franken](#).

Living in a place that has a necklace of urban lakes, a passel of wonderful theater and dining, and a musical legacy that includes both the Replacements and Prince, Twin Citians have a humble sort of pride about where they live. And boy, are they friendly. People from both coasts will have to get used to the fact that when clerks ask how they are, they really want to know.

“I think that half the people waving like crazy on the outside set of the ‘Today’ show come there from Minnesota,” said Kristin Tillotson, a reporter from The Star Tribune in Minneapolis who will be covering “the fluffy stuff” connected to the conventions.

Although everyone is all smiles — “The Daily Show” has a billboard near the airport that says “Welcome, Rich White Oligarchs” — there are some sharp edges on the welcome mat. In the past few days, a chain-link fence has gone up around the Hennepin County Jail downtown and the City of St. Paul recently bought more than 200 Tasers so that all of their officers have one.

“Every indication is the civic engagement is appropriately high and that the critical mass of cameras, computers and corporate acronyms has everyone’s attention,” said Brian Lambert, a columnist for Minneapolis-St. Paul magazine. “The prevailing vibe is that the R.N.C. is a big business event, and we will all behave accordingly, but I haven’t heard anybody fret that our reputation rides on how pleasant of a time McCain, Bush and Cheney have in our town.”

Still, a visit by the president and Mr. McCain is not small beer, here or elsewhere. And with very hot temperatures predicted and some 14 bars that have been issued temporary licenses to stay open until 4 a.m., someone, perhaps a lot of people, are bound to have a grand time. “We’re providing the canvas,” Mr. Rybak said. “Its up to the people who are coming to color it.”

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)